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Introduction: Science of Religion and No End

Arie L. Molendijk

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Since its beginnings in the nineteenth century, the field of comparative religion¹ or science of religion has been a topic of endless discussion and controversy. What is its relation to theology? Does it have a distinct methodology? How does it relate to the history of religions, to psychology of religion and to sociology of religion? Is it a field of study in its own right or is it an array of related disciplines, as the modern term ‘religious studies’ (*sciences religieuses*) may suggest? These questions have become even more urgent due to the threat currently facing the academic study of religion – and the humanities in their entirety. This is especially true in the Netherlands, where the most recent research review of 2012 found:²

[T]he research landscape of theology and religious studies in the Netherlands has in a very short time gone through an amazing, and for a sound scholarly research climate barely acceptable number of changes, fusions, mergers, transfers and other accommodations, mostly unintended by the researchers themselves, sometimes unwelcomed and counter-productive.

This situation has led to reflection and even self-scrutiny. In 2015, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) published a review of

¹ Comparative religion is, of course, an awkward term, as it confuses the level of the object that is studied and the study itself, but it was frequently used in the past.

² Research Review Theology & Religious Studies 2012, QANU 2013 (Q 354). <http://www.rug.nl/news-and-events/news/archief2013/nieuwsberichten/theology-religious-studies-2013.pdf>.

the current state of religious studies, and this journal devoted a special issue to 'the study of religion today' in 2017.³

Even more recently, the departments of religious studies at Leiden, Utrecht and Amsterdam organized a colloquium on 'The Science of Religion at the Post-theological University', a title that betrays the precarious situation of religious studies at universities that have closed their theology faculties. For this occasion, the Leiden sociologist of religion and religious studies scholar Markus Altena Davidsen has written a paper that forms the core of this special issue of *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion*. Davidsen's research interests include new religions and alternative spirituality, sociology of religion, semiotic and cognitive approaches to religion, and method in the study of religion. In his contribution, Davidsen addresses the 'current crisis' in the science of religion in the Netherlands and proposes a solution to the field's alleged stagnation. To do this, he revisits the work of the Dutch religious scholar, Theodoor Petrus (Theo) van Baaren (1912-1989), who initiated a methodological working group in Groningen in 1969 and called for a 'systematic science of religion'. This functions as a kind of paradigm for Davidsen.

Markus Davidsen suggested that his proposal could be the starting point for further discussion, and so the *NTT JTSR* editorial board invited scholars to respond to his ideas. We are very grateful that colleagues accepted the invitation and made an extra effort in these difficult times of corona – where much is asked from academics, including the switch to online teaching and meetings – to submit their responses in time. Kocku von Stuckrad (University of Groningen), Katja Rakow (Utrecht University), Kees de Groot (Tilburg School of Catholic Theology), Eric Venbrux and Arjan Sterken (both Radboud University Nijmegen) discuss various aspects of Davidsen's article. We are also happy that Markus was willing to write a response to his critics at very short notice. Interestingly, most respondents start with a clarification of their professional identity, which is not always univocal. In varying contexts, they describe themselves in different ways – as sociologists of religion, anthropologists, textual scholars, or religious studies scholars in the strict sense of the term. Apparently, the identity of religious scholars is fluid and multifaceted.

3 Klaar om te wenden ... *De academische bestudering van religie in Nederland. Een Verkenning*, Amsterdam: KNAW, 2015. The report is in Dutch and includes an English-language summary. B. Meyer, A.L. Molendijk (ed.), Special Issue 'The Study of Religion Today', *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 71 (2017) 1-112.

Not all elements of Davidsen's article could be dealt with in this issue. For example, little is said about the historical claims, such as that the work of Theo van Baaren more or less meant a paradigm switch in the study of religion in the Netherlands – by 'substituting the intuitive, *verstehende* method of Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950) with an empirical method inspired by American cultural anthropology' (p. 214). Also, the section about the efforts in the Nordic countries to establish a systematic science of religion receives little attention, although in his response Kocku von Stuckrad puts Davidsen's claim into perspective, pointing to a remarkable piece 'about what the professor has kept secret' by the Swedish scholar of religion Åke Hultkrantz.

Although the respondents appreciate Markus Davidsen's contribution for addressing important issues, it is probably fair to conclude that – in general – they are rather critical of his proposal. Colleagues are not convinced that it is necessary to adopt a position of 'methodological naturalism or non-supernaturalism' (p. 237), and Davidsen's portrayal of neighbouring fields of enquiry, such as cultural anthropology, is seen as limited at best. His idea of comparison is critiqued too, and one author (Rakow) comments that Davidsen shows strong essentialist and positivist tendencies in his proposal. The idea that 'today's threat comes from area studies and anthropology, where postmodernist, postcolonialist and feminist critiques have spawned an opposition towards the comparative, theoretical and systematic study of religion' (p. 238) is explicitly rejected by several commentators. On the contrary, in their view, such critiques have enriched the study of religion.

Perhaps other colleagues with a strong interest in a thoroughly theoretical science of religion would have assessed Davidsen's 'call to arms' (Von Stuckrad) more favourably,⁴ but the respondents in this special issue are clearly not convinced that Davidsen's ideas will generate a viable programme for the future. Some contributors even state that one has to accept that science of religion (*religiewetenschap*) is a messy field of inquiry: a kind of laboratory. Venbrux suggests that religious studies is an interdisciplinary field of study, which can facilitate debate between 'various scholars from different places.' In any case, this special issue shows a variety of views of the issues at stake here. The debate about the principles, methods and goals of science of religion and religious studies continues, and no doubt will do

4 V. Krech, 'Theory and Empiricism of Religious Evolution (THERE): Foundation of a research program. Part 1', *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 26 (2018) 1-51.

so in the future. To repurpose Johann Wolfgang Goethe's famous dictum 'Shakespeare und kein Ende', which he coined more than 200 years ago to refer to the endless discussion about the Bard of Avon's oeuvre, I would like to conclude with the phrase 'science of religion and no end'.

About the author



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